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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper describes the characteristics and life styles of single adults in Australia. Recent changes in sociological theory concerning marriage, family life, and single life are noted in the introduction, followed by a description of historical and demographic trends. Different categories of single adults (i.e., never married, widowed, permanently separated, divorced, and single parents), and types of single adult interpersonal relationships (i.e., free floating, open couple, closed couple, and de facto marriage), are described. The concept of the singles career is looked at in terms of these relationships and in adult accommodation to the single state. Positive and negative factors influencing adults' decision to remain single are noted, and negative stereotypes of singles and problematic aspects of being single are examined. Factors influencing future marital trends are highlighted. A 46-item bibliography is included in the paper. (WAS)

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Discussion Paper Number 8

SINGLES IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

Robert Staples

Institute of Family Studies Discussion Paper No. 8

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Introduction

The period between 1960 and 1980 was one of social change, particularly in western industrialised countries, with significant shifts in attitudes to sex roles, sexual behaviour, fertility patterns, race relations, political and economic institutions, educational processes and other aspects of social organisation. Changed attitudes and values related to marriage and the family have had the greatest effect on social behaviour.

Traditionally, the sociological explanations of marriage and family life within western societies were based on the nuclear family and its relationship to the larger social order. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on a number of well-defined functions that were attributed to marriage and the resulting nuclear family unit. Murdock (1949), for example, asserted that marriage was that structure through which relationships were established and normalised. Others with similar views included Malinowski (1930) who claimed that marriage was a universally accepted means through which parenthood was legitimised, and Spiro (1954) whose view of the nuclear family was that it is universal; no matter what the outward structure, the essence of all families is nuclear.

Other social scientists perceived marriage and family life as being rather fixed in its relationship to the larger social order. Parsons and Bales (1955), for instance, attempted to show that the structure of the nuclear family was the best possible in a highly industrialised, urbanised and complex society. Moreover, many of these theorists shared the view that any exceptions to the perceived norm did not represent acceptable alternatives, but were rather deviant or unacceptable cases that did not fit into the normal functioning of human society. The major theme from both social scientists and the popular media was that marriage was and should be the goal of most people in a society at some point in their lives. The fact that, even at that time, the family

in most western societies was faced with a multitude of problems dissuaded them little from the normative view that marriage and the nuclear family represented the best of all possible worlds.

Yet there always has been a proportion of people who remain single, and this proportion is increasing together with another group who become single through death, divorce or separation.

'Singles' may be defined as all adults over the age of eighteen who are presently not legally married to and living in a shared residence with their spouse. The term 'singles' therefore encompasses the never married, including people living together in de facto marriage relationships, as well as the widowed, the divorced and the separated. Approximately one-third of Australia's adult population would fit into this category. By no means would all these individuals be opposed to marriage as an institution; nor would they share the same life experiences and life styles. It is instructive to realise that at least one out of every three adult Australians does not fit into the nuclear family model. Yet this large group of single individuals has rarely been studied by social scientists or had its unique problems addressed by public experts. Duberman explains:

> Sociologists are as human and culture-bound as anyone else and thus tend to ignore those elements of society that do not conform to our cultural norms. This obvious omission tells us something about our society and our discipline . . . the neglect reflects our adherence to the ideal that everyone should marry, and that, if he really wants to, anyone can (Duberman, 1974:115-116).

Historical and Demographic Trends

Singlehood, of course, is not peculiar to the decades of the seventies and eighties in the twentieth century. Most societies have provided in some form for an 'acceptable' state of being single, often within a religious context. In most societies natural periods of being single have also been permissible, such as adolescence, early adulthood and a period of time following the death of a spouse. Moreover, low marriage rates are not unknown in many countries. Because of its unique history, Australia had a higher rate of ever-married adults in 1976 than in the nineteenth century (Stolk, 1981). One of the characteristics responsible for low marriage rates in the past has been the imbalance in the sex ratio. When the first fleet of European settlers

arrived at Botany Bay in 1788, only one quarter of the 778 convicts were women. Eventually, women came to represent only one-sixth of the convicts sent to Australia. Generally, they were a few years older than the men and most were unmarried. Although there was an extreme shortage of women, comparatively few of the convict women married. In 1806 there was a total of only 360 couples who were married and about half the children under the age of 19 were born out of wedlock. By 1828 only 42 per cent of the female prisoners had married, because of a pervasive perception by their male counterparts that they were unworthy marriage material (Bell, 1974).

From the first census taken in Australia, men have outnumbered women. The nature of the convict settlements and subsequently the gold rushes led to a remarkably low ratio of females to males. In the first census conducted in 1828 there were 333 males for every 100 females in this country. Even by the turn of the century, there were only 1.8 million females to 2.0 million males. In contrast to most industrialised societies, males still outnumbered females by a margin of 31 000 in 1976 (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 April 1975). The USA, by comparison, had an excess of six million women in the same year (US Bureau of the Census, 1977). In the twentieth century this imbalance in the sex ratio largely reflected Australian migration policies and migrant intakes over the years. There were many more young men than women in the early intakes of non-British migrants due to economic requirements for labour mobility. Even in recent migrations (1967-1971) the National Population Inquiry found that males exceeded females in intake, especially in the important courting years between 15 and 24 (Storer, 1981 p.6). This situation caused Bell (1974:73) to note that 'from the women's point of view, the opportunity for marriage has always been favourable. In Australia there was still a higher ratio of males than in any comparable country with the exception of Canada'.

Certainly the uneven sex ratio posed a problem for Australia's political leaders who wanted to encourage marriage. To promote the marriage of its colonial settlers, the government gave assistance to 37 000 women and only to 32 000 men between 1831 and 1851. Being married was an advantage for those soldiers who decided to stay in the settlement; a ticket of leave and farming land was more likely to be given to married men. One of the most outstanding female figures in Australia's early history, Caroline Chisholm, placed a great value on marriage. Her strong belief in women being married was illustrated by her views on the wages to be paid to female labour. She

felt that 'women should be paid at a lower rate than men because high rates tempt many girls to keep single while (they) encourage indolent and lazy men to depend more upon their wives' industry than upon their own exertion, thus partly reversing the design of nature' (Bell, 1974:74).

Recent trends, such as the increase in divorce, more young people living together without getting married, and a later average age at marriage in most western societies, would indicate that marriage has assumed a different position than in the past. Whether this is true for Australia or not is complicated by statistics that show an increase in the proportion of the population that have ever been married (Stewart and Harrison, 1982) and data revealing that the type of household forming at the fastest rate between 1966 and 1976 was the single person household. Some of this apparent contradiction can be explained by the fairly significant increase in the number of widowed spouses, and divorced people now living alone. Since the high marriage rates are based on Australians who have been ever married by the age of 45, the group under age 45 may experience much lower rates of marriage by the time they reach the age of 45. The comparatively favourable sex ratio and strong belief in marriage lends credence to the National Population Inquiry's summary in 1975:

> More than nine out of ten Australians will marry at least once in their lifetime and some five-sixths of all Australian babies are both conceived and born in wedlock. (Australia: National Inquiry into Population, 1975:1).

Australia appears to have joined a world-wide trend for a growing proportion of people to marry. One might almost interpret it as a marriage revolution. Since World War II Australia has experienced a great increase in the proportion of the population who have ever been married. In 1971, 86 per cent of men had married by the age of 35, in contrast to 67 per cent in 1933. Only 78 per cent of women had married before age 35 in 1933 in comparison to 94 per cent in 1971 (Stewart and Harrison, 1982). Australian marriage rates in the period 1975-1977 had begun to decline, however, suggesting that the proportion of persons staying single may be on the increase (Stolk, 1981).

A high proportion of a population ever married may attest to the continued importance of marriage or of pressures to marry. It does not, however, provide an indication of the extent of singlehood, as defined earlier in the paper, in Australian society. Other data show that single person households increased 63 per cent between 1966 and 1976, forming 20 per cent of all

households in Australia. In other words, one in every five households in Australia now consists of a person living alone. The nuclear family is now in a minority, with childless households representing 56 per cent of all households in 1976 (ABS, 1976). This is not to say of course that the majority of people do not pass through a `nuclear family stage`.

Who Are The Singles?

Any discussion of singles has to take into account the strong variations in the groups classified under our definition. An 85-year-old widow shares little in common with a 20-year-old never married woman. In some cases the legal categories may disguise the true state of affairs, such as the existence of a de facto marriage with all of a marriage's attendant characteristics except the legal formalisation. The permanently separated may possess the legal trappings of marriage, but lack the companionship and shared activities assumed to typify married life. For that reason, it is necessary to delineate separately those classes of individuals who fall into the stated classification of singles.

Never Married

These are the individuals who fit the traditional definition of singles. In 1976, the never married represented the largest grouping of single people; more than 1.7 million of the 2.8 million singles have never married, constituting almost 18 per cent of the total adult population. Of that number, 1.2 million were still under the age of 30 (ABS, 1976). On the basis of past trends, it would seem reasonable to predict that most of those who have not married before age 30 will eventually do so. However, one sociologist suggests that:

> Just as cohorts of young women who have postponed childbearing for an unusually long time seldom make up for the child deficit as they grow older, so also young people who are delaying marriage may never make up for the marriage deficit later on. They may try alternatives to marriage and like them (Glick, 1975:18)

It should also be noted that a proportion of the never married will choose to live together in long term de facto marriage relationships.

Widowed

These were the second largest group of singles in 1976; almost 700 000 individuals had lost a spouse through death. The ratio of women to men in

this category was 5 to 1 (544077 to 129043) due to the longer life expectancy of women. The average life expectancy of the Australian male in 1978 was 70 years, in comparison to 77 years for their female counterparts. The life expectancy differential between the sexes has widened over the last twenty years (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 April 1982:1).

Widows and widowers are generally older than other singles groups, past childbearing and rearing ages and less likely to remarry, although there is always a certain number of younger people whose spouses have died. Often, younger singles are more concerned about dating, education, career, mobility, childbearing and finances, while studies suggest that the older widow or widower's dominant concerns are adjusting to the spouse's death, and coping with the emotional problems of loneliness as well as the more practical problems of living alone. Because of their often advanced age, their shrinking social circle and limited resource network may present some problems (Rosenman, Schulman and Penman, 1981). Of the various categories of singles, widowhood is by far the most socially acceptable. Whatever stereotypes exist about them tend to be benign (e.g. the grieving, dedicated survivor of a happy marriage). The death of a spouse is an unpreventable event and one over which the survivor presumably had no control. Under such circumstances, fault is rarely attributed as it tends to be for other classes of singles.

Permanently Separated

These people do not differ qualitatively from the divorced except for the failure to dissolve the marriage legally. In 1976 figures showed they were a slightly larger group (243000) in Australia than the divorced (217000) (ABS, 1976). The *Family Law Act* may have changed this ratio due to the large number of divorce actions filed and granted after its passage. In the 1981 preliminary census data, the permanently separated group was smaller than those in the divorced category. It is interesting to note that the rate of increase between 1976 and 1981 for the permanently separated was quite small in comparison to the other categories of singles, suggesting that since the passage of the *Family Law Act* more persons are obtaining divorces rather than remaining separated (see table II). Long-term separations have commonly been used by lower income groups who could not afford the costs of a divorce or by individuals opposed to divorce on religious grounds.

Divorced

People in this category formed the smallest number of singles in Australia in

1976 (217 000), although their numbers have increased in the past six years. It is interesting to note that past the age of thirty divorced individuals constitute the largest number of singles in the United States and the smallest number in Australia. Between 1976 and 1981, the Australian divorce rate increased by almost 100 per cent, but the divorced group still represents a smaller percentage of the singles group in Australia than in the USA (Stein, 1978 b). Probably, this difference is a function of the higher divorce rate in the USA, which is likely to be a result of the existence of less restrictive no-fault divorce laws for a longer time in that country (Glick, 1975). Within the divorced group itself, there are variations. In Australia, almost 40 per cent of the marriage dissolutions involved no children in 1980 (Stewart and Harrison, 1982). Many of these childless divorced individuals will maintain the same lifestyle as never married singles, contingent on their age at the time of divorce. Those who divorce after bearing children, especially women, will make up the special socio-economic and demographic category known as lone parents. Pesent trends indicate that most divorced people remarry.

Lone Parents

Most lone parents in Australia are formerly married individuals. Only one per cent of lone parents are reported as never married. Of divorced couples with dependent children, the average number of children is 1.9, a slightly smaller average than in two parent families (2.2) (Stewart and Harrison, 1982). 1976 census figures show one parent families to be 11.8 per cent of all families with dependent children and later figures suggest they may represent as many as 13 per cent. For the years 1978-79, in 83 per cent of these families the lone parent is female and in 17 per cent male.

Singles 'Careers'

As the available research on singles reveals, they are not an homogenous group. Until recently, there have been few attempts to differentiate between categories of single people. Stein (1978a) has developed a four-celled typology containing the features of voluntariness and permanence. His four types of singles are classified as (1) permanently and voluntarily single, (2) permanently but involuntarily single, (3) temporarily and voluntarily single, and (4) temporarily but involuntarily single.

Based on my research on black American singles, I have developed the concept of a 'singles career' (Staples, 1981). This concept describes objective movements that a person may make through various states of singlehood. A movement to another single setting or state will be accompanied by changes in self-concept. These states or settings are described below.

Free Floating
These people are often childless, mostly under 45, totally unattached to another person, and have a variety of social and sexual engagements with different individuals. Few people stay in this stage for long periods of time. Colloquially they are referred to as 'swinging singles'.

Open Couple Relationships
These are single individuals who have steady dating partners, but the relationship is open enough to encompass friendships or romantic liaisons with other people.

Closed Couple Relationships
This is a regular, ongoing relationship between two single individuals not living together, where the partners, by mutual agreement, look exclusively to each other for the fulfilment of their companionship and affectional needs. By the mutual definition of the situation, fidelity is expected and the partners have an emotional commitment to each other. At the advanced level of this stage, individuals may become engaged to be married or otherwise have an agreement to establish a permanent relationship.

De Facto Marrieds
These are individuals living in the same residence and sharing their social, economic and sexual lives. Such relationships possess many of the properties of marriage, except for its legal validation. Research on de facto marrieds in the USA suggests that long-term de facto relationships are relatively rare, and that most de facto couples eventually either marry or break up (Clayton and Voss, 1977).*

Accommodation to Singlehood
This may be classified into two sub-stages depending on the individual's age, attitude and opportunities. The first stage is *temporary accom-*

*For more information about de facto marriages, see Institute of Family Studies Working Paper No. 1, *Informal marriages*, revised edition, November 1982.

modation. For a limited period the individual will abstain from dating and lead a fairly solitary existence except for family and friendship relationships. Expectations for dating and marriage have been suspended temporarily, perhaps because of an unhappy experience with the opposite sex, or the desire to pursue educational or career goals. It is an attitude of temporary acceptance of singlehood and is more common in younger singles (under 45), single parents, recent divorcees and widows. *Permanent accommodation* is a permanent resignation to singlehood. It may result from negative attitudes to marriage, homosexuality, physical, mental or psychological disability, advanced age or overwhelming family and economic responsibilities.

Push and Pull Towards Singlehood

People may be single for a variety of reasons. In his study of singles in the USA, Stein (1976) identifies the pushes and pulls towards singlehood. The pulls are those positive aspects of singlehood which attract the individual away from marriage. The pushes are negative forces which compel individuals to become or to remain single. While any combination of push or pull factors could maintain an individual in the single state, certain ones seem paramount when we consider the traits of single people. Obviously, major push factors are marital dissolution or death of a spouse. Divorced or widowed people are then subject to the same push and pull factors as other categories of singles, which may affect their decision on whether or not to remarry.

Push Factors	**Pull Factors**
(Negative)	*(Positive)*
Divorce	Educational opportunities
Death of Spouse	More options for interesting roles
Poverty	Increased leisure time
Economic Recessions	Expanded employment opportunities
Imbalance in the sex ratio	Financial independence
Fear of commitment	Variety in sexual relations
	Love of freedom

A major negative factor pushing women towards remaining single is, ironically, a high level of education and income. Numerous studies and census

data indicate that the proportion of females who are single increases in direct proportion to increasing education and income (Havens, 1973; McDonald, 1974; Stolk, 1981). In Melbourne, based on measures of occupation, educational qualifications and residential location, single women are over-represented in higher socio-economic groups and under-represented in lower status groupings. There is no reason to believe that higher status women are more anti-marriage. Instead, as Glick notes, it could be that a significant proportion of men who are also in the upper socio-economic group still hesitate to marry a woman who expects to be a partner in an equalitarian marriage — or a woman who might be a serious competitor for the role of chief breadwinner or 'head of the household' (Glick, 1975:9).

Conversely, a negative factor pushing men towards remaining single is a low level of education and income. While single women have higher levels of income and education than their married sisters, single males generally have a lower socio-economic status than married or even divorced males (Glick, 1975). One might hypothesise that since employers have traditionally preferred family men over single men, marital status for men influences positively their employment and income earning potential. The pattern of discrimination does not operate in the same direction for women. Many employers see married women as more of a risk because their family obligations may take precedence over their commitment to the job. It can be hypothesised that a high level of income and education adds to a man's desirability as a marriage partner while it detracts from a woman's.

Among the positive factors which pull individuals towards remaining single may be the increased freedom that comes from not being married. Marriage does involve compromises, sharing, sacrifices and responsibilities that may be seen as unpleasant in an era of individualism and narcissism (Lasch, 1979). The rising rate of divorce indicates that not everyone is suited to the state of marriage or to their chosen mate. Women with a high level of education and income are no longer dependent on a male for economic support. Hence, they are free to choose between the roles of wife, mother and/or career woman. Some people, especially women, may find marriage incompatible with their personality structure and occupational goals. It is possible that traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness, necessary for a woman to succeed in the work world, may be the ones least desired in a marriage partner. Moreover, the kind of role demands on women who have both a career and marriage may make success in both roles less likely.

Stereotypes of Singles

As is true of other minority groups, singles are subject to a number of negative stereotypes. Single women are often depicted as unattractive, mentally or physically handicapped, incompetent, deficient in personal and social adjustment, lonely, sexually permissive, and losers. The terms spinster and old maid carry with them a negative connotation. While there is no comparable negative label for unmarried men, they do not escape stereotypes associated with their marital status. At various times they are stigmatised by the images of personality inadequacy, alcoholism, homosexuality, psychopathology, immaturity, selfishness, lechery and social irresponsibility (Libby, 1978).

Some of these stereotypes are difficult to refute because of lack of reliable data. Studies investigating some of the stereotypes have found only partial support for them, and strong variations within the various groups of single people. One study tested two of the more prominent stereotypes: that singles must be terribly lonely, and that they are sexually permissive. In a sample of 400 households, consisting of never married, married and divorced individuals, it was found that single people were mostly lonelier than married people, thus confirming the stereotype of loneliness. However, the degree of difference was greatest between the never married and the divorced, with the never married being least likely to associate being alone with unhappiness, and the divorced having the highest sense of loneliness. Thus, loneliness was more a function of being divorced than of being single. The stereotype of sexual permissiveness was limited to less than 20 per cent of the singles, and was, again, a phenomenon of the divorced rather than of the singles group as a whole (Cargan, 1981).

A common stereotype of singles is that they suffer disproportionately from physical and mental health problems (Havens, 1973:975). Evidence on this stereotype is mixed. One investigation of the impact of marital status on health (Lynch, 1977) discovered that the marital status of a person is one of the best predictors of health, disease and death. This study found that people who live alone have death rates two to three times higher than those of married individuals, with the differences being more marked for men than women. Lynch's conclusion is that individuals who live alone are more susceptible to physical and emotional illnesses because of a lack of human companionship.

In other studies on symptoms of psychological distress, the divorced were found to be most prone to these. Goetting (1981) found that admissions to psychiatric hospitals were highest among the divorced and separated and lowest among the married. Data on Australians reveal similar results. In a comparison between single mothers and other parents, lone mothers were more likely to have had mental health treatment in the previous year than all other parents (21.8 per cent versus 8.9 per cent). It was noted that conditions of poverty and distress may have been as much of a contributing factor as was the status of being a lone parent (ABS, General Social Survey, 1975). However, when never married women are compared to married women along similar lines, the results of community surveys show that the never married female is better off. One Australian study found depressive states and psychoneuroses, the two most common psychiatric diagnoses, to be twice as common in married women as in never married women (Dunt, 1972).

A Health Commission study of psychosocial problems of Sydney adults revealed that married men experienced fewer psychosocial problems than never married men, but that married women indicated more of these problems than never married women (Health Commission of New South Wales, 1979). Jessie Bernard (1973) cites studies which show that fewer never married than married women have a mental health impairment. In a few studies, suicide rates, which were formerly higher for never married women, are beginning to reveal a higher rate for married women (Velasco-Rice and Mynko, 1973). It is suggested that marital relationships and children are a greater source of emotional stress for women than is being single (Bernard, 1972; Headlam, 1978; Stolk, 1981).

A question that must be raised is why the problems of being single seem to be so destructive for the divorced compared with the never married. Cargan (1981) notes that the divorced, especially those without children, are going through the experience of adjusting to the loss of their partner and consequent loss of intimacy and companionship. Hence, the never married may be better off because they have not yet experienced marriage. As Goetting (1981) has observed, the adverse effects sometimes associated with divorce may actually result from the marital discord which preceded the divorce. Her major conclusion is that:

> Concerning self-reported physical disability, chronic illness, neurosis and depression, then, marriage was associated with better health only when the marital relationship was satisfactory to the respondent. Renne's research indicates that when marriage is unsatisfactory,

divorce may be a source of relief from health problems . . . What current research suggests is that it is the emotional climate of the home that is critical to our well-being rather than actual family structure (Goetting, 1981: 357,374).

Problematic Aspects of Singlehood

Most of the stereotypes are applicable only to a minority of individuals in that group. But it would be simplistic to believe that there are no negative consequences for single people in a society where the norm is assumed to be the nuclear family. After all, most societies provide structural supports and sanctions for married couples, and the single individual faces numerous barriers in a society based on the assumption that most adults are single only for a temporary period prior to or in between marriages. The belief that long-term singleness is an abnormal condition can lead to a self fulfilling prophecy. Single people may internalise the image of singles as undesirable losers and may adopt the stereotypical behaviour of the old maid or irresponsible bachelor. Certainly, singles define themselves as less happy in life than married people whenever surveys have asked for self-reports (Bernard, 1972; Glenn, 1975). Adams (1976) explains this difference as a result of the tendency to define marriage as happiness and singleness as unhappiness.

Any strong evidence of a cause and effect relationship between happiness and marital status is hard to come by. The forces that pattern the outlook of singles may largely be unrelated to their marital status per se.

Economic problems for many singles may shape their more negative outlook on life. Despite the axiom that 'money isn't everything', studies consistently show a positive relationship between income and social well being. The Henderson Poverty Inquiry (1975) found fatherless families and older lone women in Australia to be the two groups most adversely affected by poverty. Some 64 per cent of lone mothers depend on social security benefits which average $4460 a year, compared to the median income of $14 650 for employed male one parent heads (Lovering, 1982). Single mother households account for much of the rise in recent poverty status groups.

Moreover, divorce rates tend to be highest among the lower socio-economic groups (Stewart and Harrison, 1982). Even the majority of never married childless women are of middle and lower socio-economic status (Hargreaves, 1982; Stolk, 1981). Many of them are employed in non-creative

and menial tasks which could make life less fulfilling for them. The tedium associated with repetitive process and assembly work means that these women may not be able to find the same kind of work satisfaction or identity as single women in more satisfying higher status occupations (Hargreaves, 1982; Stolk, 1982).

Other factors affecting singles may be prejudicial attitudes and discrimination. Singles may face problems in securing responsible jobs with prospects of promotion and in obtaining credit. They may not be invited to social events because they are not paired off. Friendships may be more difficult to initiate and maintain with married couples. Singles often feel more conspicuous when they have to go to a restaurant, theatre or party, or when they travel alone (Cargan, 1981). Various laws and the enforcement of laws tend to discriminate against single individuals. Income tax and adoption regulations, for instance, very consciously favour married couples.

A basic problem, it would seem, is that singles are not well integrated into a family-oriented society. While work represents a source of identity for those few who have creative and autonomous jobs, for most individuals — whether married or single — this is not so. The advantage for married people is that they have the option of adopting an orientation toward the family if the career rewards are not meaningful or satisfying. Singles do not have a family role to fall back on. Moreover, there is almost no research, and thus little information, on what happens with childless singles in the post work years. Since people may expect to live 20 years after their most productive work years have ended, what roles, friendships or support networks will exist for these singles?

Adjustments to Singlehood

Finally, the thorny question persists as to what accounts for different adjustments to single life within the various categories of singles, especially the gender differences. Never married women seem to fare much better than never married men (Bernard, 1972; Headlam, 1978). Several reasons have been advanced to explain this gender differential. Davis and Strong (1977) suggest that single men have more difficulty in coping with the mundane tasks of life: shopping, washing, cooking and cleaning. Women, on the other hand, acquire mastery of these tasks as they grow up.

What, then, of divorced individuals, who have the highest indicators of maladjustment to their single life? The divorce rate is highest in the lower socio-economic groups, groups which tend to have, in general, higher rates of stress and mental illness, along with other social problems. In Australia, as many as 80 per cent of people who divorce before age 30 remarry within six years (Stewart and Harrison, 1982). That leaves a minority of individuals (mostly lower income) who do not remarry. The experience of divorce, together with financial stress and poverty, may predispose this group even more to emotional and subsequent physical illness. Divorced men, for example, often complain of feeling shut out, restless and at loose ends, and of a need to engage in social activities even if they are not very pleasurable (Goetting, 1981). Thus, it would appear that in contrast to their former married life, singlehood is more of a problem for divorced people than for the never married.

About Choice

All of the aforementioned points raise the central question of why individuals choose never to marry, or do not remarry after divorce or widowhood. In part, we have already answered the question by pointing to the increased role options for women and the push and pull factors that promote singlehood. An answer may lie in the environment in which modern marriages in urban and industrialised societies take place. Historically, mate selection and family stability were ensured by the arrangement of marriages by family and kinship groups. These same primary groups maintained the stability of families through social sanctions applied to the regulation of material and family life. Men, women and children had explicitly defined roles and deviations, at least overt ones, were not tolerated (Calhoun, 1960). As the family shifted from an institution designed to serve the needs of society to a unit where personal needs of affection and security were to be met, the rules for mate selection, gender roles and goals became ambiguous and nebulous.

As the expectations for personal satisfaction in marriage increased, and the laws and sanctions against divorce decreased, it was inevitable that divorce (and singlehood in most countries) would rise. In Australia, the divorce rate increased by 56 per cent between 1975 and 1979 (Stewart and Harrison, 1982). In part, as Edgar (1980) explains, the marriage revolution, which has

generated the highest percentage of people marrying in Australian history, is partly to blame for the increasing marital breakdown and higher divorce rates. When the children of the baby boom reached maturity in the early 1960s, putting pressure on each other to marry early, the result was a high divorce rate among this high risk young married group. Another explanation is cited by Glick (1975:22):

> A certain amount of divorce undoubtedly grows out of the fa 't that the supply of acceptable marriage partners is very often quite limited, and those who would be most ideal partners never meet, or if they do, they may do so at the wrong time or become unavailable to each other at the optimum time for marriage. In other words, marriage partners are typically joined through a process of chance, often involving compromise, and if the compromise element is substantial, there should be no great surprise if the marriage is eventually dissolved by permanent separation or divorce. In view of the haphazard manner in which the important step of marriage is generally undertaken, and in view of the many frailties of human adults, the surprise may be that the proportion of marriages that last — to a happy (or bitter) end — is as large as it is.

The Future of Marriage in Australia

Whether the rate of marriage will increase in Australia is doubtful. The percentage of Australian men (91 per cent) and women (95 per cent) who marry before age 45 (Edgar, 1980:9) is about the same as for most western industrialised countries. How far, if at all, it may decline, may be affected by forces unique to Australian society. Unlike the United States and most European countries, Australia had an excess of men until 1980. That situation may have maximised the opportunities of Australian-born women to marry, since the imbalance in the sex ratio was in their favour. The 1981 census (ABS 1981, Census of Population and Housing) reveals that females now outnumber males by 27 600. This could presage a decline in marriage opportunities for women. However, the excess women are largely concentrated among women over the age of 60, who are not ordinarily in the marriage market.

The same social force that created Australia's excess number of men, namely migration, may have been responsible for its lower divorce rate vis-a-vis the United States and Britain. Large numbers of migrants entered Australia after World War II. In the 1976 Census, over 20 per cent of Australia's population were born overseas, a much higher proportion than in the UK and USA (Storer, 1981). Most of those migrants were men and many

were unmarried. While a majority of those migrant males aged 25 and over eventually married, most to women from their homeland, some did marry Australian-born women. With the introduction of Family Reunion Programs, more women are coming to Australia as migrants. The increased number of Asian migrants in the seventies may mean more migrant in-marriages, due to the Asian migrants' cultural prejudices against inter-marriage with other ethnic groups. The lower divorce rate of Australia could partly be attributed to the fact that many migrants married women from their homeland (Storer, 1981). The fact that long distances were traversed and extended families were absent may have maintained marriages intact where they might otherwise have dissolved. Whatever the reason, migrants have a lower divorce rate than native-born Australians. In the future the number of women in excess may increase due to migration patterns, while a higher rate of migrant in-marriages may presage an increase in the number of Australian-born women who remain single.

Other social forces may cancel out the stabilising effect of migrant in-marriages. In the USA, there is an increasing number of women in Australia obtaining tertiary education, and highly educated women are more likely to remain single. The rising rate of women entering the Australian work force means some women will gain financial and psychological independence of men. Those women may choose not to marry or not to remain married without having to worry about the economic consequences. However, it may be cynical to believe that women marry, or remain in unhappy marriages, solely for economic reasons. There is also a strong need for bonding and goal sharing. If male attitudes to sex roles and gender behaviour change through socialisation of the younger generation and resocialisation of the older generation, these women may be more likely to enter marriage or to maintain continuing marriages.

Ultimately marriage rates are a function of a combination of social forces. Throughout history they have risen and fallen with economic recessions, wars, changes in sex ratios, population control measures and industrialisation. The same has been true of divorce rates, which have registered fluctuations following changes in legislation and at times of economic and social upheaval. What is more important is that individuals be given options for marriage or divorce that are in harmony with the needs of society. As with any group that differs from the accepted norm, singles should be judged and treated on the content of their character and behaviour, not on their

marital status. In the final analysis, institutions and lifestyles are only as good as the people involved. Happiness and satisfaction are not determined by institutions or lifestyles, but emanate from within individuals and depend on the quality of relationships between people.

Tables

Table 1

THE ADULT SINGLE POPULATION OF AUSTRALIA, 1976
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census, 1976

	MEN *N*	*WOMEN* *N*	*TOTAL* *N*
Never married	1 035 876	695 205	1 731 081
Permanently separated	109 751	133 820	243 571
Divorced	95 705	121 694	217 399
Widowed	129 043	544 077	673 120
Total	1 370 375	1 494 796	2 865 171

Total population 18 and over (all marital statuses) 9 114 623

Table 2

THE ADULT SINGLE POPULATION OF AUSTRALIA, 1981
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census, 1981

	MEN *N*	*WOMEN* *N*	*TOTAL* *N*
Never married	1 663 597	1 270 342	2 933 939
Permanently separated	127 397	148 025	275 422
Divorced	178 172	222 805	400 977
Widowed	139 580	607 418	746 998
Total	2 108 746	2 248 590	4 357 336

Total population 15 and over (all marital statuses) 10 930 429

NOTE: It is not possible to make a direct comparison between the 1976 and the 1981 data because different age ranges were computed in 1981 and 1976. The 1976 data only include persons aged 18 and over while the 1981 data include persons aged 15 and over. Based on the assumption that few of the individuals between the ages of 15 and 18 would be separated, widowed or divorced, note the differences for those categories of singles between the 1976 and the 1981 census years.

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